Building Effective Family Literacy Outreach

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"Family engagement in education is related to a range of benefits for students, including improved school readiness, higher student achievement, better social skills and behavior, and increased likelihood of high school graduation. The strongest research evidence indicates that parental beliefs, attitudes, values, and childrearing practices, as well as home–school communication, are linked to student success."

-Harvard Family Research Project

Who are the parents?

Who is parenting?
Two parents
Gay parents
Single parent
Grandparents
Foster care parents
Guardians
Siblings
Other – family & friends

Parent characteristics
Age
Education
Professions
Income
Gender presence (male involvement/role models)
Community relationships (positive and negative)

School Characteristics/Demographics (context)
Rural/suburban/urban
Low/high income percentages
Ethnicity percentages
Immigrant percentages
Gender percentages

How might these characteristics affect their response to your invitations and programs?

Notes:

Assessing Family-School Engagement

School observations	None	A little	Medium	A lot
1. School calendar shows				
Parent–teacher conferences				
PTA meetings				
Family literacy events				
Drop-in opportunities				
Parent education				
Parent volunteer opportunities				
Family activities				
2. School-home communication				
Visits to home				
Notes to home				
Phone calls				
Back-and-forth projects				
3. Family services				
Counseling				
Information and referral				
Auxiliary support (food/ clothing)				
Life skills training				
4. Different ethnicities				
Represented in families				
Present in school displays				
Volunteer in building				
Participate in parent activities				
5 Different languages				
Spoken in homes				
Heard on the playground				
Evident in school displays				
Incorporated into programs				
Spoken by staff				

PARENTS' RESPONSE: What the Research Says…

1. **What does reading to your child mean?**
   - "I think it means helping your children sound out words."
   - "Reading means opening the book and reading to the end, just try to get the job done. My problem is my children won't sit still."
   - "Could it mean selecting fun books for your child."
   - "I really don't know what teachers mean when they say, 'Read to your child.'"
   - "I don't read that well myself, so I don't read to my child. I don't know how to get started."

2. **Why do you think your child's teacher often requests that you read to your child?**
   - "Because it is good for them, I think."
   - "That's something teachers tell me every year, but they don't tell me what they mean."
   - "Maybe it is something that kindergarten and first grade teachers just say to parents, I don't know. I get so tired of them saying the same old thing every year. I don't even know what they mean, anyway."
   - "Books can help our children learn to speak better."

3. **Do you understand what the teacher means when he or she asks you to read to your child?**
   - "No, I don't know what the teacher means."
   - "No, I don't know the correct way to begin reading to my child."
   - "I don't know what to do when I open the book. I mean I don't know what to do first, second, third, and so on."
   - "I wish somebody would tell me what to do, because I am fed up with teachers saying, 'Read to your child.'"
   - I am tired of teachers saying, 'Your child would do so much better in school if you read to them and talked to them.' I do talk to my children. Maybe I don't read to them 'cause I have difficulty reading myself."

4. **What difficulties have you encountered when you have attempted to read to your child?**
   - "I guess my answer to this question is if you can't read or don't feel comfortable reading, you ain't gonna want to read to your children."
   - "I try to read, but I guess I am not doing it right. My child becomes bored, not interested in the book, so I quit trying to read."
   - "I don't know what books to read to my child."
   - "Because I don't read well, I don't make time in my schedule. I just pray that they will learn to read in school."

5. **Is storybook reading an important part of your daily interactions with your child?**
   - "No, storybook reading is not an important part of my daily interactions with my child." (This comment was made unanimously by the parents.)

WHAT FAMILIES PROVIDE: Answers from Children

Responses to the question:
"What did your family provide you and instill in you that helped you get where you are today?"

Provided

- Love and nurturing
- Day-to-day necessities
- Stable and safe environment
- Financial support
- Psychological support and encouragement
- Advice and guidance
- Understanding, caring, and respect
- Monitoring and supervision
- Discipline and structure
- Exposure to new experiences and opportunities
- A good learning environment

Instilled

- Basic skills and knowledge
- Problem-solving skills
- A questioning of why and why not
- High expectations and standards
- Strong value system (e.g., responsibility, independence, perseverance)
- Respect for others and yourself
- Belief that education is important
- Work ethic
- Belief in yourself
- Sense of security

Tips for Working Respectfully with Families

1. Honor the home culture, bridging gaps with the school culture
2. Make connections between reading at home and at school. Include the whole family.
3. Choose appropriate materials, asking about interests and experience.
4. Encourage learning activities in the home, incorporating daily activities.
5. Communicate progress in regular intervals, through phone calls, notes, meetings, etc.
6. Include parents in the planning process, seeking family perspectives and goals.
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Notes:

16 Ways to Involve Parents and Caregivers

1. Ask parents/caregivers to read to their children regularly or to listen to the children read aloud.

2. Loan books, workbooks, and other materials to parents.

3. Ask parents/caregivers to take their children to the library.

4. Ask parents/caregivers to get their children to talk about what they did that day in class.

5. Give an assignment that requires the children to ask their parents questions.

6. Ask parents/caregivers to watch a specific television program with their children and to discuss the show afterward.

7. Suggest ways for parents/caregivers to include their children in any of their own educationally enriching activities.

8. Send home suggestions for games or group activities, related to the children's school-work that can be played by either parent/caregiver and child, or by child and siblings.

9. Suggest how parents/caregivers might use home materials and activities to stimulate their children's interest in reading, math, and other subjects.

10. Establish a formal agreement whereby parents/caregivers supervise and assist children in completing homework tasks.

11. Establish a formal agreement whereby parents/caregivers provide rewards and/or penalties based on the children's school performance or behavior.

12. Ask parents/caregivers to come to *observe* the classroom (not to "help") for part of a day.

13. Explain to parent/caregiver certain techniques for teaching, for making learning materials, or for planning lessons.

14. Give a questionnaire to parent/caregiver so they can evaluate their children's progress or provide some other form of feedback.

15. Ask parents/caregivers to provide spelling practice, math drills, and practice activities.

16. Ask parents/caregivers to sign homework to ensure its completion.

Steps to take for Family Involvement

RESEARCH

- Ask child
- Tour community
- Interview parents
- Seek school knowledge

OUTREACH

- Phone calls
- Letters
- Visits
- Parties
- Conferences
- “Neighborhood walk for success”

EXCHANGE OVER TIME

- Contracts
- Journals
- Regularly scheduled phone calls or meetings
- Games
- Score cards and point systems
- Weekly/ monthly events
- Periodic rewards

FULL COMMITMENT

- Parent tutors
- Planning committees
- Parent teams

Family Literacy Site Notes: Worksheet Ideas

Planning Notes (some possibilities)	
Research	* Community/school demographics * Community asset mapping (FBO's, CBO's, businesses) * Student achievement data and school records * Parent interviews * Social service agencies * Law enforcement/juvenile justice
Outreach	* Phone calls * Curbside visits (at pick-up time) * School meetings/parent conferences * Media (cable TC networks, newspapers, radio, etc.) * Community organization meetings * Outreach through parent planners/representatives
Activities	* Student programs/performances * Parent training in reading aloud * Book character parades * Children's book author events * Cultural stories, costumes, and food festivals * Résumé workshop (with child care)
Exchange Over Time	* Literacy backpacks * Adult literacy/ESL classes * Family literacy event (monthly) * Book discussion groups * Film or video projects * Correspondence projects (online or actual) * Publishing projects (community history, etc.)

Assessment Evaluation	* Event attendance/participation data * Written evaluations or responses * Parent surveys * Student surveys * Teacher surveys * School literacy achievement data * Interviews * Focus groups
Rewards	* Certificates * Student "thank-you" notes * Prizes * Books * Tickets to community events (museums, theatres) * Celebrations (parades, parties, treats, etc.)

Family Literacy Site Notes: Worksheet

Planning Notes	
Research	
Outreach	
Activities	
Exchange Over Time	
Assessment Evaluation	
Rewards	

Event Planning Checklist

☑	Task	Questions to Consider
☐	Define the event	What is the hook or theme? Does it respond to real community needs and interests? How will it build literacy skills and family connections? How will you involve families in all stages of the planning process?
☐	Create an agenda/list of activities	What/how many activities will you offer?
☐	Assign responsibilities	Who will: Provide the literacy expertise and guidance? Set up the space? Greet and sign in participants? Lead activities? Provide refreshments? Stay and clean up?
☐	Create and distribute invitations or flyers	Who will design/produce them? Are they culturally inclusive? Into how many languages should they be translated? How many will you disseminate? How?
☐	Generate publicity	Who will write a press release? What other outlets are there to increase publicity? Can someone act as event photographer? If so, will you need photo releases?
☐	Secure necessary space and equipment	Where will the event take place? Will you need audiovisual equipment? How will you accommodate special needs (e.g., translators, accommodations for physical disabilities)?
☐	Locate supplies	What supplies will each activity require? Who will bring what? Can any local businesses or organizations make donations?
☐	Plan event evaluation	How will you measure event success? Will you distribute a survey? Who will design, collect, and compile it? Will there be a reflection/discussion at the end of the event? How will this event link with other activities to follow?
☐	Perform follow-up tasks	Who will capture post-event reporting (e.g., to the press, project administration, partners)? Who will write thank-you letters? What is the bridge to the next family literacy activity?

Strategy 1: Support Families

Many of the programs described in this guide embody a philosophy of family support. They know that healthy child development requires strong nurturing families that in turn are nurtured and supported by individuals and institutions within the community.[14] The field of family support has shown that efforts that are truly supportive view families from a strengths-based perspective, are responsive to their needs and interests, and empower parents to act on their own and their children's behalf.[15] Program evaluations point to support and service provision as one way to engage families in their children's learning.[16] Services and activities to support families include parenting workshops, adult education classes, and other support services such as health, housing, and financial support.

How to Support Families

- Focus on families' assets.
- Consider the concerns and needs of the families and children served.
- Solicit family input.

Yet family support is more than meeting families' basic needs. After school stakeholders agree that programs need to support and build on the strengths of families. Specifically, programs can do the following:

Focus on families' assets.
Some programs' approaches to family engagement take a deficit perspective, aiming to "save" youth from the negative influences of families or to "cure" families by teaching them about societal and school norms.[17] Although parents can benefit from adult learning opportunities, such as English, GED, and parenting classes, these classes should not be the sole focus of a family engagement program.[18] In fact, some program coordinators have found the term "parenting classes" to be very unpopular with families.[19] Perhaps it is because parents do not want to be perceived only as needing assistance but also as positive contributors to their children's development.

The Math and Parent Partnerships Program (MAPPS), which began in Phoenix, Arizona, takes a strengths-based approach to parent education. MAPPS offers workshops that address parents' desire to gain new math skills in order to help their children with schoolwork. Workshops simultaneously appreciate parents' knowledge base and offer them leadership opportunities. Specifically, parents' knowledge and lived experience with math are explored in the workshops. For example, building tables becomes a way to explore ideas of geometry while drawing on families' own expertise, such as construction and mosaic tile work. Parents are also supported to later lead the workshop for other parents.[20]

Consider the concerns and needs of the families and children served, in addition to one's own programmatic needs and mission.[21]
This may be accomplished in part by offering a wide variety of opportunities for families to be engaged. For example, in the Greenwood Shalom After School Program profiled in section III, trips to museums and theaters appeal to parents seeking enrichment opportunities, while math and literacy workshops appeal to parents who want support for

helping their children with homework. This range of activities and strategies helps the program reach more families.

Addressing families' most critical needs may also be of great value, even if it seems to be outside the scope of the program. Capital Kids is an after school initiative in Columbus, Ohio, serving 2,800 children in 35 sites. The four initial pilot sites serve children and families in the most vulnerable neighborhoods. Many of the children come from female-headed, African American families living below the poverty level. Many are homeless. The program participates in a Take Home Grocery Program that engages parents and children in a fun learning activity while meeting families' critical needs. The Mid-Ohio FoodBank delivers a large supply of food to Capital Kids bimonthly. After the program allocates its share for daily snacks, enough groceries remain to send some home with every family. Families come to the after school site to pick up a box of groceries, and sorting and distributing the food becomes an interactive activity for children and parents.[22] In an evaluation of the program, 95% of parents mentioned the food bank as a valuable service offered.[23]

Solicit family feedback on current programming and implement their ideas for new programming. Ideally, after school programs will ask families what they think about the program, how they can contribute to the program, and how they can be served in return. By including the ideas of families in programming and improving what families think could be better, after school program staff may see improved program outcomes.[24] Families' ideas and feedback can be sought regarding the services programs provide to parents, how the program operates, and the program curriculum and activities for children.[25] Such ideas can be gathered through surveys, focus group discussions, one-on-one meetings, and even suggestion boxes. This strategy allows families to feel that they can have a role in shaping program goals and activities.

Parent Services Project (PSP), a family support organization in San Rafael, California, worked with several local elementary schools to increase family engagement and leadership. PSP hosted a series of parent meetings to invite reflection and visioning about children's learning. Parents in one school identified safety and homework assistance as key issues and came up with the idea for a homework club to address these issues. Over the course of 3 years, with support from PSP, this group of parents shared their concerns, developed a vision, successfully applied for a grant, implemented a homework club, and gained valuable leadership skills. As parent Alma Martinez explained,

Easy Things You Can Do to Support Families

- Have a parent suggestion box.
- Conduct formal and informal surveys about the program on a regular basis.
- Host parent forums or discussion groups that allow parents to meet one another and discuss their concerns about child rearing and other family matters.
- Strike up conversations with parents that focus on them. Give them time to talk about themselves instead of their children.
- Work with the children to plan and host a family appreciation event.

"Parents need this kind of [leadership] support to discover who they are and what they can do."[26] This example shows how from program inception families can not only give feedback, but lead the design and implementation of after school opportunities for children.

How to Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships

- Communicate frequently and in positive ways.
- Be there for families.
- Provide leadership opportunities for families.

Strategy 2: Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships

Successful family engagement efforts depend in part on the level of trust families feel for program staff. Communication is a building block of family involvement in part because it can help build trust with families. Letting families know that they are welcome and keeping two-way lines of communication open are fundamental communication strategies.[27] Using a variety of communication strategies can help reach a larger group of parents, as well as allow parents to discuss whatever concerns they have, whether or not they are program related. Many programs may never achieve 100% participation in workshops and events because of parents' busy schedules, a common challenge. However, through telephone calls or letters, programs can send a general message that families are welcome. A communication log can help programs track and improve their communication efforts (see box on page 21 for a sample log).

Once basic communication has been established and families begin to feel more trust toward the program, staff can begin to foster deeper kinds of family engagement and parent leadership. The strategies below focus on basic communication as well as more elaborate practices to solicit families' input regarding program governance and leadership.

Communicate frequently and in positive ways.
Program evaluations reveal that communication about program mission, goals, and strategies are one way to engage families. This information can be conveyed through orientations, open house events, newsletters, email, and participation in class activities. Communication can also happen more informally.[28]

At the Hyde Square Task Force After School Program profiled in section III, staff members talk to parents about children's progress at parent meetings, at pick-up time, and over the phone. Speaking to parents on a daily basis makes for a warm, welcoming environment. All EFI coordinators find that informal conversations and sharing good news about their children make parents feel valued and connected. Having gregarious staff who feel comfortable with parents can also help build staff–family relationships.

Promising Practices to Engage Families

Public School 253 in Brooklyn, New York, which serves a large immigrant population, offers an after school program with the support of the YMHA/YWHA. Language barriers prevented the administration and teachers from connecting with families. In response to the communication problem, the after school program hired staff who reflect the backgrounds of the students and relied on a variety of communication strategies, including flyers, telephone calls, and conversations during pick-up time. The program has an open door policy that allows parents to discuss any concerns with the coordinator. Program staff act as mediators when parents and school staff are having problems, and the staff teach parents how to advocate for themselves to the school. Staff are also trained on how to "smile and chat with parents to encourage openness." The school now relies on the after school program to advertise events and communicate with families. Teachers go to program staff to learn more about children and their families, which teachers find particularly useful when they are addressing students' challenging behavior.[29]

Tracking Communication With Families

A communication log can help after school programs track their communications with families, especially as it promotes families' involvement in the after school program and their child's broader learning. Programs can use a log to assess how often they are reaching out to families, the nature of their interactions with families, and with whom they are communicating.

For example, program staff might log communications with families that meet the following criteria:

- Interactions that last over 5 minutes
- In-depth individual conversations (but not brief chats at pick-up)
- One-on-one meetings with families (but not group flyers or emails)
- Personal emails and phone calls (but not event reminders)
- Personal letters or notes (but not calls regarding attendance)

For each interaction meeting these criteria, program staff might provide the following information:

- Date of contact
- Name of child
- Family member contacted
- Staff member who contacted
- Type of contact
- Length of contact
- Reason of contact
- Nature of contact

Reasons for contact might include:

- Providing information about the child's progress
- Asking for family's opinion/feedback
- Discussing family strategies to support child's learning/ development at home
- Talking about child's problems with behavior, academics, emotions, etc.
- Other reasons for communication not listed

The nature of contact might include what was shared or talked about during the contact, such as family issues at home or emotional problems that the child was experiencing. For confidentiality purposes, this information does not need to be very detailed in the log.*

*This sample communication log was adapted from the Engaging Families Initiative.

Easy Things You Can Do to Communicate and Build Trusting Relationships

- Make a regular effort to share positive news with each parent about their child.
- Welcome parents. Greet them in the front of the room or building when they arrive. Always call parents by name and make a point of smiling.
- Offer informal social events or activities that are fun, such as craft nights, potluck dinners, and weekend trips to museums, theaters, and other cultural institutions.
- Conduct periodic family orientations to familiarize new families with the program. Ask current program family members to help you present the materials.

Be there for families.

Programs can be in a position to offer families' personal support and need not limit their communication with families to program matters or children's progress. At the Greenwood Shalom After School Program described in section III, parents talk about their personal concerns and life challenges, such as relationship problems, immigration troubles, and financial concerns, knowing that staff will listen, provide advice if appropriate, or direct them to the proper resources. Likewise, the Beacons community centers in New York City provide formal support groups and counseling for parents in addition to their programs for youth.[30]

Camp Success is a multisite after school program in inner-city Huntsville, Alabama. The program partners with Second Mile, a family engagement organization, to support family events and activities. Camp Success offers a variety of classes, including a GED program and presentations on nutrition, drug awareness, and social services. In addition to their adult-education approach to family outreach, parents attend a Family Night Share Talk at each site to share experiences and discuss topics such as first-time home purchasing. Later in the evening, children and parents eat dinner together and participate in a family activity.[31]

Provide leadership opportunities for parents in order to build community.

Parents are likely to feel more investment in and ownership of a program if given the chance to participate in decision making. Parent councils and governing boards can provide mechanisms for this kind of participation. However, not all programs feel ready to implement these kinds of partnerships with families, and several programs have yet to realize parent leadership goals. Many EFI program coordinators, for example, want to form parent councils but cite competing time demands as barriers to realizing this more advanced type of family engagement.

The Bob Lanier Center for Educational, Physical and Cultural Development has partnered with Poplar Academy in Buffalo to serve 200 students, predominantly African American, in an after school program. All parents must sign on to the program's board, and 10 parents are recruited to form the Core Members Committee. The core

members serve as the liaison to the board and schedule monthly meetings to discuss important issues. Core members have several responsibilities, including finding parent volunteers and scheduling speakers. The inception of this after school board has spurred many other positive changes: The school itself has formed a parent–teacher organization, teachers report that a higher percentage of parents are attending parent–teacher conferences, and students' behavioral problems have decreased.[32]

Strategy 3: Hire and Develop a Family-Focused Staff

Staffing is a critical component of any program; without positive family–staff relationships, even the best-intentioned program will not succeed. Increased involvement, engagement, and leadership of families depends on the initiative and approach of staff. Welcoming families requires staff sensitivity toward families developed through staff's prior experience or professional development and often someone who will make a deliberate effort to connect with families.[34]

Designate a staff member who has, as part of his or her duties, responsibility for engaging families in the program.

A study of 21st Century Community Learning Centers found that programs with a designated family involvement staff member were more likely to encourage families' support in students' learning, offer services and classes to families, and have families contributing to program governance and leadership, compared to other programs.[35] However, Donna Walker James and Glenda Partee warn that a dedicated staff member should not serve as an excuse for other staff to not work with families.[36]

Understanding that engaging families requires time and planning, EFI allocated funds for programs to have staff time dedicated to working with families. An Outreach Specialist line item was created midway in program budgets so that sites could compensate staff for conducting family outreach, assessing family needs, and planning for family social activities and learning opportunities. The goal of these concrete changes was to enable after school program staff to be more intentional in their work with families. Programs could either create a part-time position for a parent to reach out to families or increase hours for part-time staff members to do this work, which in turn helps reduce staff turnover.

How to Hire and Develop a Family-Focused Staff

- Designate a staff member with family engagement responsibility.
- Hire staff with family engagement experience.
- Hire staff who share parents' experiences and backgrounds.
- Foster professional development.

Hire staff with family engagement experience.

When hiring staff, ask if they have experience working with families. At the Hyde Square Task Force After School Program, one tutor, who has extensive experience in family empowerment training, also serves as the parent liaison. She tutors children, but when staff need to discuss concerns with parents, she also offers her assistance.

Easy Things You Can Do to Develop a Family-Focused Staff

- When interviewing potential staff, consider candidates' experiences working with families and ask them how after school programs can engage families.
- Invite a family engagement expert from a local K–12 school, university, family support agency, or guidance center to speak to staff.
- Offer programs, such as exercise classes, first aid courses, and art workshops, for both parents and staff.

Hire staff who share parents' perspectives and backgrounds. Having one or more staff members who are parents themselves can bring a valuable perspective to family outreach and communication efforts. Recruiting parents as regular volunteers can send a similarly positive signal to other families. Consider one parent at the Greenwood Shalom After School Program who makes use of her accounting background to volunteer as the program bookkeeper. She describes the program as "a family" and plans to continue volunteering even after her son stops attending. Her lasting commitment to the program is obvious and appreciated by staff. Likewise, hiring staff who share families' cultural and linguistic backgrounds can foster cultural congruence and remove language barriers.

The Somali Community Services of Seattle's Child Development Program is an after school and weekend tutoring and family support program specifically targeting children and families from Somalia. Though recruiting teachers from the community is a challenge, Somali teachers are central to the program's strength. Parents feel that the Somali staff understand the challenges their children face in a new educational system. The teachers help parents overcome language barriers by linking families to schools. During Saturday education classes, parents learn how to use resources provided by schools, such as counselors and health care. The program also invites speakers to talk about immigration services and other relevant topics.[37]

Foster professional development through a network of after school programs committed to family engagement. After school programs can serve as a resource for one another as they foster family engagement in learning and development after school. Through regular meetings and conversations, programs can share success stories and offer suggestions for overcoming obstacles to family engagement.

The Parents and Communities for Kids (PACK) initiative of New Haven, Connecticut, has brought together community organizations to promote children's and families' learning at home and in the community. Participating organizations include museums, parks, libraries, and recreational centers. Key staff and volunteers, including parents, hold meetings every other month to discuss best practices and ways to improve learning programs.[38]